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Challenging Expectations

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Abstract

Challenging Expectations

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2020

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This report serves as an overview of the evolution of thought surrounding my studio practice as well as the progression of the work itself as it relates to ideas of abstraction, familiarity, open-endedness, denial, and expectation. Each of these concepts will be expanded on in this report as critical points of interest in my practice. The order in which these concepts appear has no particular significance. Selected works will be explained in relation to, and evidence to back up, these concepts as they appear and may be present multiple times throughout.

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Evolution of Thought

In working with packaging, specifically from toys, candies, and other junk foods, my initial paintings of these objects had a direct relationship to the source material. These paintings utilized the packaging material as a still life object with a one to one translation, carefully observed, and direct. (Figure 1) In rendering these objects I began to consider the amount of information necessary in order to understand the object being depicted. I began to omit critical parts of information including text and detail, reducing them to abstract forms, colors, and shapes. My deliberate omission resulted in images slightly detached from their original source, but still recognizable. I began to question if it was necessary to understand the object being presented, if there was any reason why the source material had to be recognizable. Continuing to push the material beyond a literal rendering and into abstraction, the work began to have an autonomy and authority as a new object with its own way of being interpreted. The forms, colors, and shapes became separated from the inherent meanings behind depictions of packaging with all of their information presented. (Figure 2) As I progressed, the scale of the work also grew to accommodate this change. Moving from smaller more direct paintings on paper to large scale paintings on canvas allowed for an immersive visual experience while simultaneously increasing the size of the information within the paintings. The objective in pursuing this further became a freeing of shape or form from describing something that can be directly recognized or understood. Forms, colors, and shapes would begin to move so far beyond the source packaging arriving at a point where they may never be traced back. Rather than all aspects or information relating to one singular package be depicted, the visual rhetoric from multiple sources was borrowed and merged together. With

this merging, the paintings began to function as hybrid environments where borrowed visual information is allowed to function with independence and authority. With this independence came an open-endedness. Without the ability to trace forms, colors, and shapes to their respective sources, the works allowed for interpretations not possible before. In these new built hybrid environments, distillation, flattening, and fragmentation allow the work to resist a sense of closure, while also creating familiarity and the promise of interpretation.



Figure 1: *Millennial Pink*, 2018



Figure 2: *Maruchan*, 2018

Familiarity

In utilizing visual rhetoric found in everyday packaging for toys and junk food there is an inherent relationship to the contemporary familiar. These languages have become understood and ingrained parts of our visual culture. Particular colors, forms, compositions, and shapes are readily associated with the pre-established rhetoric of advertising and packaging. There is the ability to connect these particular colors, forms, and spaces to this language as it appears in the work. (Figure 3) The understanding or subconscious recognition of these languages is what endows the work with a sense of being known, even if the source material is no longer recognized. I transitioned the visual material used in the paintings from being somewhat understood to unidentifiable while still keeping traces of the original sources. (Figure 4 and Figure 5) Being familiar, but not recognizable is what allows the work the ability to function separately from the context of the original packaging.



Figure 3: *XTRA CRUNCHY*, 2018



Figure 4: *Goliath*, 2019



Figure 5: *Phantom*, 2019

Denying Satisfaction of an End and Openness

In thinking about the inability to trace materials back to their source, the role of the familiar operated as a means to draw one in with a promise of interpretation, but the paintings then deny or thwart a concrete resolution. The inability to pinpoint a precise source and utilize it to form a rationale or logic, results in paintings that actively resist an end or a complete understanding. There is no condensed, digestible, or overarching explanation or conclusion. I am considering the source material as both the beginning and the end of the paintings. The beginning as in the source from which the paintings are built; and the end as in if the source was identifiable the paintings would cease to be open ended visual experiences. I began pushing how far removed, forms, colors, and spaces could be from the source material, while still offering an invitation to engage and simultaneously holding someone at arm's length. While the information in the paintings has an established relationship to packaging and advertising language, there is the inability to trace these forms, spaces, and colors back to those respective sources. The information now functions with its own authority and autonomy, no longer beholden to the context of the package it was sourced from. (Figure 6 and Figure 7)

In thinking about authority, autonomy, and the oblique, I consider the work of Richard Artschwager. Materials, forms, and images with predetermined languages are utilized and represented in such a way, their purpose is unclear, yet enticing to engage with and taken with the authority they present.

In reexamining the amount of information included in the work while still resisting a clear explanation, there has been a reintroduction of small contextual moments throughout the

paintings such as the use of text fragments. However, their objective is left open to speculation and not meant to define the experience. Earlier works had little to no contextual elements whatsoever. (Figure 8 and Figure 9) In more recent works, while some fragments of information may be present, there is no way to piece them together to form any sort of overarching conclusion about the work. (Figure 10) The want or need to have a complete understanding is something I am actively calling into question.

Through the paintings, I challenge the hierarchy of achieving a resolution, over the act of engaging with the work. The paintings champion the latter, choosing to focus on the process of participating in a visual experience with no clear end point. I challenge the primary goal of engaging a work with the intention of eventually having a complete understanding of it. The paintings operate in direct opposition to this notion, with an objective to participate in the visual games of painting, familiarity, and expectation.

This resistance to an overarching explanation or conclusion allows the work to be open-ended and oblique, leaving room for interpretation, speculation, and curiosity. With no clear stated end point, the ability to navigate through the work becomes non-linear and allows for an exploration that keeps intact a permission to interpret the work based on an invested visual engagement. My sentiments are echoed in an interview with Amy Sillman, in which she states;

"I want to expand the question of when something is done. I want to vex the ending. I want to mess around with that. I like the idea that if you make a work that has no clear ending, then you must play with the ending. Because if you don't, you're not highlighting the weird, lovely openness of abstraction." (Mullen)



Figure 6: *Stain*, 2019



Figure 7: *Mellon Sprout and Phantom Worms*, 2019



Figure 8: *Encroach*, 2019



Figure 9: *Float*, 2019



Figure 10: *Death Mountain*, (detail) 2020

Expectations

One of the assertions within the work is a forced reconciliation with the expectations of the amount of information presupposed when engaging with a painting. Through the selective omission of information within the work there is a consistent thread of establishing a logic only to eventually subvert it. I found myself asking why an object, form, or space had to adhere to a set way of rendering I had established. Once recognized, I began to intentionally break those logics. This moment marked the introduction of subtle slips, breaks, or inconsistencies within the paintings. Forms or spaces would activate in a particular way in the work only to activate in an entirely new way somewhere else. Shadows do not adhere to the logic of the form it describes, light sources are not always consistent, objects can appear both in front of and behind spaces, forms both float and attach themselves to an established ground. (Figure 9) This challenges preconceived notions about how forms and spaces are expected to operate within painting. Through the intentional rupturing of predetermined logic, slips and the seemingly wrong or amiss become an accepted outcome.

Related to this but not quite the same, I have been using omissions, sudden stops, or the incomplete as devices to second guess closure. Incompleteness, stoppages, and omissions within the work force a reckoning with the expectations of what it means to engage with a complete painting. Strategic editing can suggest critical information is missing, something has been omitted for reasons unexplained. Because the source image is unknown or unrecognizable, there is an inability to have a complete understanding of what exactly is being omitted, only the understanding something has been left out. (Figure 11) The challenging of

expectations of both predetermined logic and completeness are other ways in which the work denies satisfaction. Satisfaction of an end, of completeness.



Figure 11: *Schwimmbad*, 2020

Painting Dialogues

There are various painting traditions the work is in dialogue with. A relationship to Pop Art can be found through the mutual use of everyday common materials (i.e. packaging). These materials are cheap, easily accessible, and mass produced for consumption. Through the act of painting the status of the common object is elevated and through abstraction given autonomy. There is also an ingrained visual language of design and advertising in relationship to painting that is utilized. Color is employed in a similar way as a means to allure or entice one to engage with the painting. The material being used is considered current, of the now, and has the ability to evolve as the dialogue surrounding packaging and design evolves. However, a critical difference is the work's purpose or intention not to be a critique on consumer culture or to investigate design theory. Unlike Pop Art's relationship to critique or comment on consumer culture, observations on mass production, and societal shifts of thought in relation to packaging, these works rather investigate the relationship between understood visual information and a rereading of that information through the act of painting.

There is also a negotiation of digital advertising language and painting language. (Figure 10) Images, forms, and colors created in a digital format are utilized and reasserted in painting language. Flat opaque areas of digitally conceptualized colors are reexamined through the lens of painting and renegotiated as color fields with complex layers and shifts, while still referencing something artificial. Hard seemingly digital edges are placed in contrast with soft painterly boundaries that have the ability to reassert form while still familiar as non-organic. To quote Sillman again,

“I’m in this process of trying to create a free space. Like an open field, where figure and ground are in very ambivalent, complex relationships. On top of that, I also wanted to see if I could try to blurt something out, or make something completely immediate, that ends up fitting perfectly.” (Mullen)

There is also the work of Ruth Root, whose work negotiates the digital or manufactured (though the use of screen printing and commercially printed fabrics) with painterly language. In her work there is also the use of pattern or repeated mark as pattern to imply space. Root’s work also explores the “connections between everyday things, and art things, and things happening in the work is essential for painting and for looking at paintings,”. (Andrew)

The work is also in dialogue with the tradition of color field painting. Large immersive areas of color built by layering thin washes of color repeatedly over time place the work in dialogue with Mark Rothko. There are elements of fuzziness in relation to edge or boundary as well as a response to the physical boundaries of the canvas. (Figure 11) The relationship to body is also heightened by the size of the physical canvas. The bodily relationship to the work allows for an immersive experience when in close range and an overall survey of the work when observed from a distance. These large color field spaces are experiential and enveloping as well as deep and immersive. Working in relationship to Rothko, these large areas of color give the sensation of “standing on a threshold or reaching into space.” (Wick) The large scale of the work also heightens the contrast between the small original source object and the large-scale painting. The dramatic shift in scale from source object to painting also serves as another means of abstraction.

In relation to how forms operate within paintings, I consider the work of Tomma Abts and Malevich. Abts for built complex illusory spaces that rely on an accrual of knowledge over time as well as fixed objects within the paintings that hold the potential for movement; Malevich, much like with Abts, shapes, and spaces seem to slip and slide past, underneath, or above each other while hovering over a ground parallel to the viewer. These are important principles present in my own work. (Figure 4, and Figure 9)

There is a relationship to still life painting through the use of small hand-built models. As part of my process, after sketches are made, I build small three-dimensional models out of papers and plastics. The models are used to incorporate observed light and space with precision. The model itself functions as the still life object through which form, light, and color relationships can be observed and mediated through paint. The paintings themselves, however, are not explicit renderings of the models. Rather, they serve as a guide or suggestion, another way of thinking about the source information. As the paintings progress and shift, so too do the models. The painting often outgrows what the model asserts at its inception and shifts in tandem with the work in order to accommodate this growth.

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